

No Love Like That of a Child's

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Summary: Ezra Standish is about to learn the love of a child; only to then learn the pains of losing all that you hold dear.

No Love Like That of a Child's

What drives a man down a spiraling staircase of despair that no man deserves to go down? What could possibly drive a man to fear his life isn't valuable enough to sustain it? It was a question that Ezra Standish had running through his mind at that very moment. Was there anything in this world that could want Ezra alive?

>
 Why has my despair led me to this point? Why are these memories plaguing me now? What's brought this on? He wondered to himself as he sat in lonely solitude in his room above the saloon. Despite the music reverberating up through his floor from the saloon as it was bustling with life, he sat in lonely despair in his room, shutting out the known world to everything.

>
 Ezra stood and walked over to his dresser, with slow deliberate movements he pulled open the drawer of the bureau, leafing through it's contents carefully. He slowly brought out the faded brown picture and studied it. The bright shining face of the beautiful woman inside of it stared back at him. Her gaze was one of happiness and love. Love for him, happiness for their future. He squeezed his eyes shut, almost afraid to open them. Afraid to see those same exquisite eyes in the picture staring at him now with anger and contempt in them. Anger at him, and contempt for what he had been forced to do. But he was almost sure that she did not know what he was forced to do. Nothing was ever done on his part either to make her realize why he did what he did; so therefore, he might as well be guilty. Right?

>
 Ezra placed the picture back into the dresser drawer, and shut it. He felt a sob catch in his chest, but he refused to let it release itself. He leaned heavily against the dresser, his breath shallow as he suppressed the ever-growing memories assaulting his mind. When would they leave him alone? Why were they plaguing him now? Why after almost two years was he remembering a past he could

never return to?

>
 A sharp knock on his door snapped Ezra's attention away from his despair. Briefly. He frowned wondering who would dare disturb his sorrow and self-blame.

>
 "Ezra? There's something downstairs. Was left at the back of saloon. Inez found it," Buck Wilmington called.

>
 "And why does this concern me?" Ezra asked through the door.

>
 "She was addressed to you," was Wilmington's comment. This piqued Ezra's intrigue. She?

>
 "What are you referring to Mr. Wilmington?" Ezra asked once he had opened the door. Buck had an odd look on his handsome face.

>
 "I think you best come see for yourself," Buck said his voice almost strained. Confusion and worry needled Ezra's mind, and he nodded once, closing his door behind him as he followed Buck downstairs. Ezra felt oddly aware of how everyone seemed to be watching he and Buck as they walked to the back where he was sure the other five men were with Inez, and Ezra's package.

>
 "What is going on gentlemen?" Ezra asked as he moved to stand beside Inez. His eyes widened ever so slightly when the beautiful woman turned, a small baby wrapped with a blanket in her arms.

>
 "This was addressed to you," Chris Larabee stated. Ezra frowned at the man before he turned his gaze on the bundle. Inez moved the blanket aside to reveal the small child's face. He felt his heart pound. The baby had her face. Everything about this child was her. It wasn't till the baby opened her eyes that he knew the inevitable truth and realized why she was addressed to him. Staring up at him, with more hope and trust in them than he had ever seen, were his own pale emerald eyes. And he knew instantly. This child now cradled in Inez's arms was his own.

>
 "I don't understand this," Ezra said as he took the child instinctively from Inez. Josiah Sanchez watched him with interest. It was almost as if Ezra knew exactly what to do.

>
 "It seems Senor that you are a father, or at least someone thinks you are," Inez stated brushing a lock of coal black hair off the baby's forehead. The child blinked at Ezra and opened her pert little mouth and yawned, then blinked again as if she knew who Ezra was.

>
 "As much as I never thought I would admit it, I can't seem to deny it either," Ezra whispered. "She looks exactly like her mother."

>
 "I think we need to find out what's going on here Ezra, and find out who this baby is," Chris said. Ezra finally broke his gaze from that of the child in his arms to look at Chris. He nodded once and put the baby back in the basket she had come from.

>

>
 "Mariah was a wonderful woman. I never thought that any woman could honestly consider me worthy of love in anyway. I met her shortly after we came together to protect the town. I had business to attend to in Meadowsbrook, and Mariah was a resident there. I was instantly enamored. I came to understand Buck's attraction to women instantly," Ezra was saying as the men sat in the church.

>
 "You've never been attracted to a woman before Ezra?" Buck teased.

>
 "There is a difference my friend between instant attraction and an instantaneous feeling that you have found the most important person in your life. That is what I felt. But I have to admit it scared the hell out of me, therefore I chose to stay away from

Mariah. I knew I couldn't give her a life that she would want, and I was almost certain she didn't care for me in anyway," Ezra said looking to where Inez sat with the baby. She had insisted upon coming with the men.

>
 "But one day while passing the livery I heard someone in tears. It was Mariah. She had apparently gotten into a fight with her mother, which hurt her deeply. She never did tell me what it was about. I hate hearing a woman cry, or see her in any pain, so I made my way into the livery. She was startled by my presence to say the least. I sat with her and allowed her to cry on my shoulder. That was all I offered her, was a friend. An ear to bend to help her feel better, but I knew that I was offering so much more, without realization," Ezra said. He gracefully rose from his seat at the pew.

>
 "Days passed, and we would rendezvous with one another in the livery. We spent all of our time talking to each other, nothing more, nothing less. Before I knew what had happened, I was in love with her. There was something about her that made me feel completely, as if there was nothing in my life that had ever been bad. Finally I realized that the things that I had always held against my mother didn't matter, for this woman was in my life. I should have known it was too good to be true."

>
 "As we continued to meet, our feelings for one another became more apparent. One day Mariah came into the livery and handed me something that I still hold dear. She had visited the local photographer and had him take a picture of her. Specifically for me. She knew I would eventually leave her. I realized I couldn't. We mutually met, and made love. I never thought I could be happier or leave her. I was willing to run out on you men to stay with the woman I was in love with. That is till her father found us," Ezra said. He turned pain-filled eyes on the men.

>
 "He never found us in a compromising position mind you, but he knew what I was, and he told me that if I didn't leave town and his daughter, that he would have me killed. I knew I would do Mariah no good if I were dead, for I was almost certain she would blame herself, I chose to leave. But I also think it was a bit of cowardice. Fear for my own life and not willing to give it up just yet forced me from the town as well. Not a fear of Mariah's father. I was afraid to die," Ezra whispered looking away from the men. Since their inception by Judge Travis almost two years ago, he had ingratiated himself pretty well with the group, but at times he still worried if they would think him weak. Specifically at a time like this when he fully admitted his fear of dying, and in front of men who would think nothing of taking a bullet for the other. Including himself.

>
 "Apparently you ain't too afraid to die Ezra. You risked yer life to save us when Hank was in town. You could've been killed if it hadn't been for that money in yer jacket when Mary was almost killed by that assassin. You or any of us could've been killed in Red Fork," Vin Tanner reminded him softly from his position in one of the pews. Ezra glanced over his shoulder at the tracker, before his gaze slowly drifted out to those of the other men.

>
 "Mariah obviously didn't hate you are condemn you if she sent the child to you." Josiah said to him.

>
 "What if she had no choice?" Ezra asked.

>
 "Don't see it as no way out Ezra. See it as a miracle," Josiah replied.

>
 "What can I offer a child Josiah?" Ezra said waving his hand a bit.

>
 "Your love," Inez said, having remained so silent through all

of this, that the other men had forgotten her presence with the baby.

>
 "It didn't appear to do Mariah any good," Ezra whispered. Inez had seen the look on Ezra's face earlier when they had first gotten to the church and he had read the accompanying letter with the child. Apparently her mother had died giving birth to her, and her last wish was for the baby to be sent to be with her father in Four Corners.

>
 "Senor I have seen you with children. You were made to be a father. A loving father. Not many men have the patience you do with children," Inez said.

>
 "It is far different when you are patient with other people's children then with your own," Ezra mumbled.

>
 "You're right Ezra. You're even more patient with yer own," Chris replied. Ezra looked up at the man.

>
 "What if I can't do it alone?" he asked. The men could tell that Ezra's worry lay with the baby, not with himself.

>
 "You won't be," Inez said rising with the baby firmly in her arms. "You have all of the other men to help you. You also have my help."

>
 "I can't ask that of you Inez," Ezra said. Inez smiled shaking her head.

>
 "I do not mind Senor. You live at the saloon, so I would not be far from her anyway. Besides the pequeña muchacha has my heart in that tiny fist of hers. I would be honored to help care for her as well," Inez said. The baby seemed to respond to Inez as she waved her fists in the air. Ezra chuckled and took her from the woman.

>
 "Inez is right Ezra. You'll make a good father," Nathan Jackson said. Ezra looked up from his daughter to look at the other men.

>
 "I certainly hope you are right Mr. Jackson," Ezra replied as he looked back down at the bundle in his arms.

>

>

> "Have you decided what you are going to name her?" Inez asked Ezra as they stood together in the kitchen of the saloon, a small wash basin in front of them. Ezra was bathing his daughter gently. The baby watched him, waving her hands occasionally.

> "Not yet. I want her to have the perfect name," Ezra said as he rinsed some of the soapy water from the baby's body. Inez watched him with a raised eyebrow.

> "She's been here almost two weeks Ezra, I think she needs a name. We can't keep calling her the baby," Inez commented. Ezra glanced at her then looked back at the child he was holding.

> "What do you suggest then my dear?" he questioned.

> "What about Mariah?" Inez suggested as she held up a soft towel to enfold the baby in when Ezra lifted her from the tub. He gently took her into his arms, rubbing her back gently. Inez had to suppress a smile at how well Ezra had taken to fatherhood.

> "As much as I loved her mother, I do not wish to name her after her," Ezra stated sadly. Inez nodded, not pushing the matter.

> "Did Mariah ever mention what her favorite name was then?" Inez asked cleaning up the slight mess they had made. She had been surprised when Ezra would bathe his daughter. She had experience through her own siblings' children that bath time usually turned into a grand ordeal, with a lot of clean up. Ezra's daughter seemed so laid back.

> "Mariah admired her mother greatly. Despite their conflicts. She did mention one time that when she had a daughter, she wished to name her Abigail after her mother," Ezra said as he stroked the baby's

back.

> "That is a beautiful name," Inez said stepping closer. The baby's head moved. She turned it, pressing her forehead into Ezra's neck, her green gaze seeking out Inez, a familiar voice to her. She gave Inez a gummy grin.

> "I think she likes that name," Inez said with a smile. Ezra grinned.

> "Abigail it is then. Abigail Standish," he said.

>
 "Pardon me, but can you tell me where I can find a hotel?" a soft-spoken man asked JD Dunne as he passed the stage drop off on his way to the Sheriff's Office.

>
 "It's right across the street sir," JD responded to him.

>
 "Thank you young man. You are?" he asked.

>
 "JD Dunne sir," JD said. The older man nodded.

>
 "Thank you again Mr. Dunne," he said and tipped his hat. He turned to the stage and gathered his luggage, heading for the hotel.

>
 "Wait mister, what's your name?" JD asked.

>
 "Oh I'm terribly sorry, how rude. My name is Dr. Jacob Benjamin," the man said. JD nodded.

>
 "You're welcome Dr. Benjamin," JD said tipping his hat also. Benjamin nodded and smiled, heading for the hotel to rest before he would leave again in a couple days.

>

> Something jerked Ezra awake and he didn't know what. He tilted his head, listening when he heard a slight raspiness that he had never heard before. He frowned, as he listened closer, wondering where it was coming from. It was coming from his daughter's cradle. A frown marred his handsome features as he rose. He lit a lantern, but kept the flame low, not wanting to disturb Abigail. She usually slept through the night, which he was told was surprising for her age, so he didn't want to wake her.

> Ezra lifted the lantern to gaze down at her and felt his heart slam against his ribs. His hand trembled so violently that he had to put the lantern on his dresser. He looked down at Abigail again and felt slightly dizzy. Her chest was rising and falling far too fast. Her little lungs seemed to be struggling to take in the air that she needed to live. Her skin was pale, and her lips were tinged a bit blue. He stumbled backwards a bit.

> Ezra pressed a hand to his forehead forcing himself to stay a bit calm, and figure out what he needed to do. He nodded once sharply and made his way to his closet. He had on his sleeping pants, so he grabbed a shirt, throwing it on over his naked chest and grabbed Abigail's small blanket that Mary Travis had given him. It had once been her son Billy's. He laid it out on his bed, then retrieved his daughter from her cradle. He shivered almost violently when he felt how cool she was. Surely she will be okay. Yes she will be okay Ezra thought as he wrapped her into the blanket. He slipped on a pair of dressing slippers he had and blew out his lantern. He left his room, closing the door behind him.

> Lanterns in the hallway lit his way as he hurried to the stairs, and started down them. The saloon was eerily silent and dark, save for one light near the back. Ezra didn't a quick mental calculation and realized it was Sunday, the day that Inez did late night bookkeeping.

> "Inez?" Ezra called, hearing the panic in his voice. Inez came skidding out of the office, the concern evident on her face.

> "Is something wrong?" she asked noting Ezra's state of dress, or lack thereof. She knew that something was seriously wrong if the

gambler didn't take the time to completely dress.

> "Something most certainly is," he said gravilly as he let her see Abigail. Inez gasped as she saw the blue tinge to the child's lips, and her shallow breathing.

> "I'm taking her to Nathan," Ezra said his voice cracking. Inez nodded.

> "I'll get the others," she said. Ezra didn't wait for her to finish before he was out of the door, and hurrying as fast as he could towards Nathan's clinic, doing his best to not jostle his daughter.

> "Nathan?!" Ezra said frantically as he came up the stairs. No response was heard behind the door. He shifted Abigail in his arms and lifted his hand to tap at the door when it opened.

> "Ezra what's wrong?" Nathan asked worriedly, seeing how distraught the man was.

> "I don't know, something's wrong. Please Nathan, you have to save my little girl," Ezra said. Nathan stepped aside ushering Ezra in and instructing him to put the baby on the bed. Ezra laid her down and stepped back worry in his eyes. He heard the distinctive pounding of booted feet ascending the steps outside before the door opened, and the other men came in.

> "Nathan?" Chris questioned.

> "I don't know Chris. Something ain't right, but I ain't no doctor," the black man said after a moment.

> "You have to do something Nathan," Ezra said. Inez pushed past the men and walked over to him. She bit her lip as she looked down at Abigail in the bed, her tiny body dwarfed by the size of it.

> "Ezra I don't know what I can do. I don't have the proper trainin'," he said looking sorrowfully at the gambler.

> "She can't die Nathan! You have to do something," Ezra pleaded. Nathan sighed.

> "I'm sorry Ezra," he said. None of the men knew what to do when Ezra grabbed the folds of Nathan's shirt and hauled him towards the wall.

> "You save her NOW!" he growled. Abigail's eyes fluttered open and a soft mew came from her throat, sounding raspy and breathless. Ezra's head jerked to her form, a solitary tear sliding from his eyes. He turned back to Nathan.

> "Please Nathan. She's my baby girl. She's all I have," he said his voice cracking. Nathan felt his own heart shattering. There was nothing he could do and he knew it, but he didn't know what to tell Ezra.

> "Wait a minute!" JD said. The men turned to him.

> "Not now kid," Buck said.

> "No wait, this afternoon when the stage got here, there was a man who asked me where the hotel was. He said his name was Dr. Jacob Benjamin," the young man said. Ezra let go of Nathan's shirt.

> "Can he help her?" Ezra asked.

> "I'll go get 'im," Vin said already leaving the room. He headed immediately for the hotel.

> "What room is Dr. Jacob Benjamin in? It's important," Vin asked the clerk at the front desk. Judging by the look on Vin's face, the man instantly gave him the information he wanted.

>
 "Where's the child?" Benjamin asked. Vin had quickly woken up the doctor then told him about how his friend's child was seriously ill and needed a real doctor, and all the town had was a healer who knew enough about medicine to take out a bullet, stitch you up, and mend broken bones, but that was as far as he could go with it. No sooner had the second sentence of the story left Vin's mouth had Benjamin been up and getting dressed, ushering Vin to lead him where

Abigail was.

>
 "Over here," Nathan said gesturing to the baby. Benjamin almost knew immediately what was wrong with the child when he saw her, but he still wished to examine her.

>
 "Who's the father?" Benjamin asked as he opened his black bag and took out a stethoscope.

>
 "I am," Ezra said his voice cracking with his words, his eyes full of worry, his body rigid. Inez stood beside him, her hands on his arms as she leaned against his back, her cheek against his bicep as she watched Abigail with fear-filled eyes. She was willing all of her love towards the baby, and her support towards Ezra.

>
 "Is that the mother?" Benjamin asked him, referring to Inez. Inez started to open her mouth to say no when Ezra cut her off.

>
 "Close enough," he said. Benjamin nodded as he did his examination. The room was tense and filled with worry as the doctor worked on the baby. Benjamin did every test to determine his diagnosis, and his heart fell with each one. His suspicions had been right. He took his stethoscope from around his neck.

>
 "Will she be all right doctor?" Ezra asked.

>
 "Where is her mother?" Benjamin asked.

>
 "Her mother died having her, it was her wish that our daughter be sent to live with me," Ezra said. "Will my daughter be all right doctor?" Benjamin sighed again and rose.

>
 "What is your name?" he asked.

>
 "Ezra Standish, doctor please," Ezra almost pleaded.

>
 "Mr. Standish, I'm afraid your daughter has a congenital heart defect," he said. Ezra blinked at him.

>
 "What does that mean?" Ezra asked his heart beginning to ache.

>
 "Your daughter's heart is very weak. You might have noticed symptoms of this when she came to you. Most babies are very active, right from birth. She might have appeared more docile, less active. It's because her heart can not pump the blood she needs through her body easily. The more she moves, the worse she becomes. Her breathing is raspy because her lungs are demanding blood it can't get, and it's taking its toll. Her skin is pale and slightly blue because her heart isn't pumping the blood it needs. You might not have noticed this before because she was younger, not as big. As she grows her heart grows weaker," the doctor said. Ezra was shaking.

>
 "But she's going to be okay isn't she?" he asked his voice cracking.

>
 "I'm afraid not. This is not something that can be cured with surgery or with any kind of medicine," Benjamin said.

>
 "What are you trying to tell me Doctor?" Ezra asked.

>
 "I'm afraid Mr. Standish what I am trying to tell you is, spend what time you can with your daughter. You won't have her very much longer."

>
Chapter 4:

>
 "What?!" Chris demanded for Ezra. The gambler was stunned by what the doctor had said. Inez's hands tightened on his arms as tears rolled down her cheeks.

>
 "There's nothing you can do doctor?" Buck asked in disbelief.

>
 "I wish I could do something," the doctor said. The men looked at him and realized he meant what he said. Ezra was still far too silent.

>
 "How long?" Ezra finally asked his voice low.

>
 "It's hard to tell. A day, a week, a month, two months. It truly depends on how long your daughter's heart can withstand the

strain of keeping her alive," the doctor said.

>
 "You talk of her as if she's nothing," JD said his eyes filling with tears.

>
 "I wish I could say something to make you feel better, but I can't. The fact is, this is a very sick baby girl, and there is nothing I can do for her. All I can suggest is that her father be with her till the end," Benjamin said his voice as gentle as he could be.

>
 "Thank you doctor," Ezra whispered. Benjamin looked at him and nodded, realizing he was no longer needed. He headed for the door, as Ezra made his way to the bed to kneel beside it. He stroked his daughter's black hair gently. She seemed to move towards his touch, knowing who he was. He smiled gently at her. He rose to his feet and lifted her to him, cradling her against his strong chest. Her tiny body curled into his warmth, settling into a slightly restless slumber.

>
 "Where are you going Ezra?" Nathan asked.

>
 "Back to my room," he stated.

>
 "What are you going to do?" Buck asked him. The men saw the gambler crumble slightly then his spine stiffen.

>
 "I am going to do exactly what the doctor told me to do gentlemen. Spend time with my daughter while I still have her," he said. Ezra turned and glanced at Inez briefly before he left the clinic and headed for his room.

>

> Inez gently rapped on Ezra's door the next morning. She slowly pushed it open when no answer was forthcoming. What she saw made her heart break just a bit. Ezra laid curled on his bed, Abigail tucked against his body, his arms around his tiny daughter. Inez walked over and perched on the side of the bed, touching the baby gently, frowning at how cool she was.

> "She's so young," Ezra whispered. Inez jumped a bit not realizing he was awake.

> "Yes she is," Inez said stroking Abigail's cheek. Ezra scooted backwards on the bed and patted where he had been with the baby.

> "Lie down," he said.

> "Ezra..." Inez started.

> "Please." Inez regarded the man for a moment, then stretched on the bed, laying down facing him. Ezra moved his arm so that the baby was cradled on the bed between the two.

> "Two weeks Inez. I've only been a father for two weeks, and now I find out that it's all being taken away from me," he whispered in such a tortured tone that Inez felt a sob catching in her throat.

> "You'll have other children Ezra," she reminded him, watching him. Ezra looked at her then looked down at Abigail, her cherubic cheeks puffing with each breath she took in her sleep, little bubbles blowing as she slept.

> "I know," he whispered stroking her cheek gently. "But that doesn't make losing her any easier. I wanted her to grow up and play with her brothers and sisters she might have. I want to walk her down the aisle when she married a boy like young Billy Travis. She won't ever do those things." Inez bit her lip. She moved her hand and interlocked her fingers with his, feeling how cold they were.

> "I love her Inez. I love my baby girl with all that I am and yet there is nothing I can do to save her," he whispered a tear falling down his cheek. Inez reached up and wiped them away.

> "She knows you love her Ezra," she said gently. Ezra swallowed convulsively.

> "Stay with me please?" he whispered to her. Inez nodded and remained where she was. She watched Ezra as he watched his daughter. Soon his eyelids slid shut, and she saw the even rise and fall of his chest as he slept. But she didn't move. She stayed where she was, and watched over this strong man and his frail daughter as they slept.

>

> "Dr. Benjamin?" Nathan questioned a few days later when he saw the man outside of his door.

> "Mr. Jackson isn't it? Please call me Jacob," Benjamin said.

> "Nathan. I thought you headed on towards Frisco?" Nathan said.

> "I've decided to postpone my journeys for now. I want to be in town till Mr. Standish's daughter... Well just in case he needs me," he said. Nathan nodded.

> "There really isn't anything that can be done for her is there?" Nathan asked. Benjamin shook his head sadly.

> "All I can truly do to be honest is make her comfortable with as long as she has left with her father," he said. Nathan handed him a cup of coffee. Benjamin sipped at it gratefully before speaking again.

> "I regret I never did find out the baby's name," he said.

> "Abigail. Ezra honored something her mother had always wanted, and named her after her mama's mother," Nathan responded.

> "He's a good man to raise a child alone," Benjamin said. Nathan's eyes went distant a moment as slow sad smile crossed his features.

> "Yes doctor he is," he whispered gently.

>

> Ezra rubbed at his eyes as he woke up. It had been almost a month since he found out that Abigail was dying. Each day he watched as his precious little girl got weaker. Then seemed to get stronger. He was grateful for Dr. Benjamin. The man had been a great help in preparing Ezra for the eventuality of Abigail's death, as well as helped him with caring for his sick daughter.

> Ezra yawned a bit as he walked over to Abigail's cradle. He looked down at her and his heart slammed hard against his chest. She was very still. Too still. He leaned down and her breathing wasn't coming at the rate it should. He didn't bother grabbing the shirt he had removed earlier to cover up, nor his jacket. He grabbed Abigail's blanket and scooped her against his bare chest. Wearing nothing more than his trousers and boots, Ezra raced from his room, Abigail clutched to him tightly.

> Buck and Chris' heads both snapped up when they saw Ezra tear out of the saloon, Inez coming out soon behind him. They didn't even glance at one another before taking off at a dead run towards Nathan's.

> "Dr. Benjamin!" Ezra cried out running up the stairs. Nathan heard him coming out of the clinic. He rushed back in. Benjamin was inside when Ezra skidded into the room.

> "She's barely breathing," he huffed out his chest aching. Benjamin took her from him and laid the baby on the bed. He nodded to Nathan who pushed Ezra out of the room.

> Ezra stumbled out to the landing of Nathan's place his eyes riveted on the now closed door. He turned when he heard fast coming footsteps up the stairs. Chris and Buck's heads peeked over the top of the landing first, soon followed by JD and Inez, then Mary, Vin and Josiah. Inez had Ezra's shirt and jacket in her hands. She handed them to him.

> "Thank you," he whispered slipping the shirt on, buttoning it, but leaving the garment untucked. He didn't bother to put his jacket on, fearing the worst. Almost an hour passed before Benjamin came out with Nathan, his face grim.

> "She stopped breathing..." he started. Ezra stiffened, and Inez reached up to hold his arm tightly.

> "But I got her to start again, but Ezra, the end is near. Be prepared," Benjamin said sadly. "Her heart is extremely weak and there are occasional pauses between beats." Ezra nodded bravely.

> "May we all be with her?" Chris asked. Benjamin nodded.

> "It might be easier for Ezra too," he replied. Ezra didn't argue as he walked into the room, his eyes riveted on his child lying on the bed. She was awake, her eyelids heavy. He moved closer to her and gently sat on the bed. Abigail looked at him, her eyes blinking. She mewed gently at him, one hand waving towards him. Ezra felt a sob rise but swallowed it. Ezra slid to the floor, kneeling beside the bed. He took her little fist in his as he watched her.

> Ezra was oblivious to the others, except Inez as she sat behind him, on the bed, her hand touching his shoulder. His green eyes were concentrated on his daughter. Slowly her eyes slid shut, but she was still breathing. Ezra stood a bit, lifting her into his arms and sitting in the chair.

> "Ezra..." Nathan started.

> "I want to hold her when she dies Nathan," he said his voice cracking. The pain was so crystal clear in the gambler's voice that he couldn't deny him.

> Ezra's eyes never left Abigail's face as she blew bubbles lightly. Her eyes moving beneath her eyelids. Ezra touched her hand and her fingers instinctively curled around his, but not as tightly as she once did before. Ezra swallowed his tears knowing that soon her pain would end. Abigail's breath shuddered slightly as she shifted in her father's arms. Ezra cradled her closer. He watched the rise and fall of her chest. He bit his lip determined not to cry out as he watched her chest slow as her life slowly came to an end. Tears started fall heedlessly down his cheeks Abigail's chest slowed even more before it finally stopped. The room was silent, except for the soft sobs of Inez and Mary, sniffing coming from the men. Benjamin made his way over but Ezra shook his head sharply, pulling Abigail tighter to him.

> "Aaaah!" he sobbed holding his daughter close to his chest as his sobs tore through his body. He began to rock back and forth in the chair, cradling the child to him, his grief pouring out of him.

> Inez watched him her hands covering her mouth as she felt her heart breaking for him. She looked at the others willing them away. Chris met her eyes and nodded. He turned to the others ushering them out. He glanced one last time at Inez and Ezra, who was still cradling his daughter to him.

> Inez turned back to Ezra her own tears falling down her cheeks. Ezra slowly rose and set Abigail down on the bed, his fingers trailing down her cooling cheek. He turned to the center of the room and collapsed to his knees sobbing as if his life would end. His fists began to connect with the floor as his grief over took him. He arched his head towards the ceiling, letting out a howl of pain that ripped through Inez's heart. Ezra soon shuddered and was hunched over, his strong shoulders slumped and shaking as he sobbed. Inez walked over and kneeled beside him, wrapping her arms around him. He turned in her arms and put his own around her, sobbing against her shoulder.

> Eventually Inez sat cross-legged on the floor, Ezra lying with his head in her lap, hiccups causing him to shudder as he clung to her leg. Inez stroked his hair as he grieved his child. Ezra was incredibly still as he thought about the past month with his daughter. He never knew love existed as strong as the one he felt for her. She had been his world the moment she was left at the saloon.

> "My world is gone now," Ezra said breaking the silence of the room with his heartfelt words. Inez's throat caught before she spoke.

> "She'll always be here in a way Ezra," she said her own pain in her voice. Inez had come to love Abigail as her own as she helped Ezra with the child.

> "I want her here in the flesh. I want to see my baby grow up, turn me into an old man before my time with her beauty," he declared.

> "I know Ezra," Inez whispered, not knowing what else to say.

> "I want my baby back," he whispered softly, his face burrowing in Inez's leg as he began to sob again. Inez folded herself over him, hugging him tightly, her tears falling onto his cheeks as they grieved together.

>
 Abigail was laid to rest in the town's cemetery two days later. Ezra had been running on sheer willpower alone after she died. Barely sleeping a wink, and when he did, it was only because Inez forced him to sleep in her room during saloon hours. Ezra refused to sleep in his own room at the moment. Every time he saw Abigail's cradle he felt his heart crumble.

>
 Chris was the only one of the men who understood the pain of losing a child. But the pain Ezra was experiencing now was so different then the pain he felt. Adam's death ultimately could have been prevented had he been there. For Ezra, he had to watch his daughter die, not able to do anything to stop it, or make it easier. Inez was the man's only saving grace. She wouldn't allow him to drink himself into oblivion. She was there as a shoulder to lean on. The men were grateful to her. Inez was really the only one that Ezra would allow near him since Abigail died.

>
 And she hadn't left his side since. Even now at the cemetery as Josiah performed the funeral over tiny Abigail Standish's grave, Inez's arm was linked through Ezra's, offering the only thing she could at that moment. Her undying devotion and friendship. Whatever would happen between the two in the future, no one would ever be able to break the bond the two had formed over baby Abigail. Though by blood Ezra was the child's father, Inez had been her mother in her heart, and had grieved as a mother would now.

>
 "May the soul of Abigail Standish find rest and peace in the arms of the Lord," Josiah said. He made the symbol of the cross above her grave and nodded to Ezra and Inez. The couple stepped forward. Inez dropped a single rose onto the box that had been lowered into the ground. Ezra kneeled beside the grave and lifted a handful of dirt up. He fingered it a moment.

>
 "Despite our short time together my darlin' little girl, I loved you more than a father could love his daughter. Now you are with your mother again. Watch over us my sweet Abigail," he said softly, but all had heard. He tossed the first handful of dirt into the grave. One by one, the other members of the seven knelt at Abigail's grave and tossed a handful of dirt into the grave. Slowly the people began to leave the cemetery, whispering condolences to Ezra who still stood with Inez at his side. His tired green eyes were riveted on the grave in front of him. Soon the only people who were

left were Inez and Ezra.

>
 "Do you think she understood me and heard me?" Ezra asked softly.

>
 "I think Abigail knew all along how you felt," Inez returned her hand tightening on his arm.

>
 "I hope so," Ezra whispered. He kissed the tips of his fingers and pointed them at Abigail's grave sending her a kiss. He covered Inez's hand with his own as he turned to head to town. They were silent for most of the walk.

>
 "Will you be all right?" Inez asked him softly. Ezra lifted one corner of his mouth gently.

>
 "In time I will be. But I will never forget my baby girl," he said.

>
 "There will be others Ezra," Inez said softly.

>
 "I know. And when there are, they will know all about their eldest sister Abigail. The light of their father's life who taught him that love can come in the tiniest of packages, but leave such a large imprint on your heart," he stated. Inez patted his arm gently.

>
 "That's why they leave such a large imprint. So that we know that love is what makes us stronger in the worst of situations," she said gently. Ezra smiled sadly at her. He didn't know what else to say, so he said nothing. He kissed Inez's cheek gently and walked past her into the saloon, and headed for his room. It was time for Ezra to learn to live again.

> <p><p>

End
file.